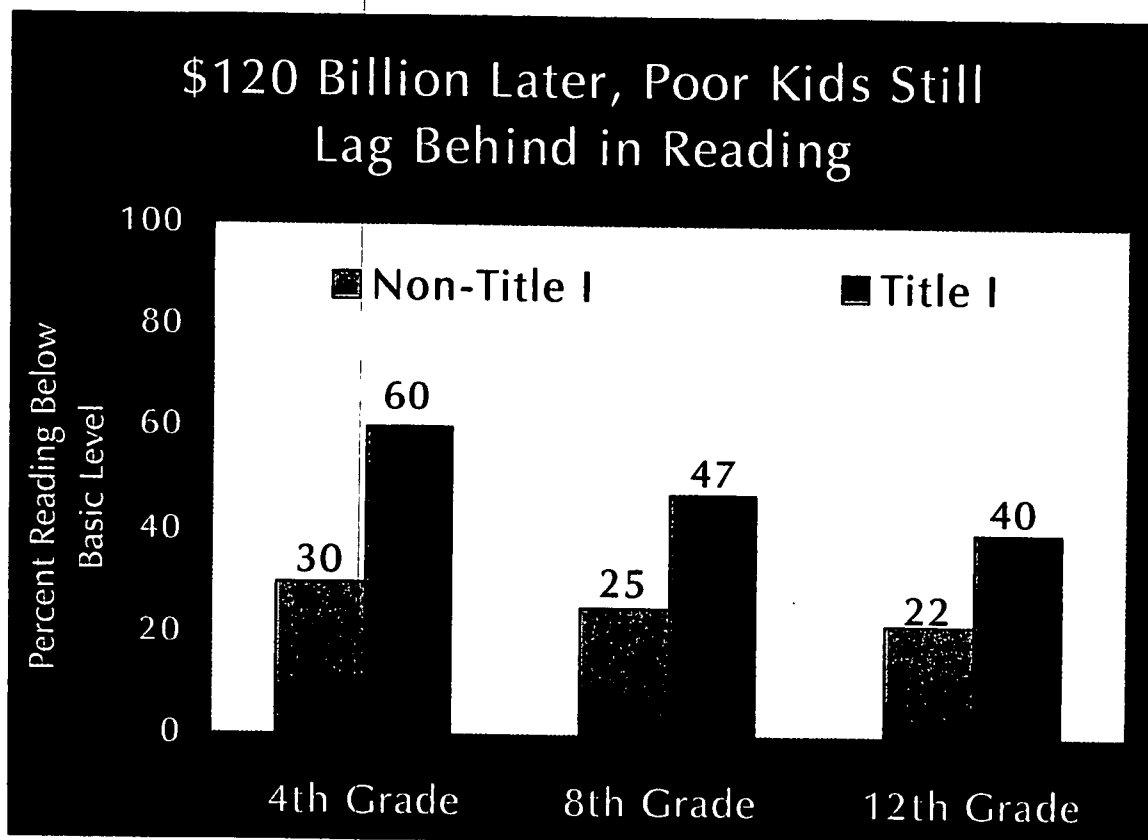


May 4, 2000

ESEA: The Miseducation of Senate Democrats

Someone has done a great disservice to Senate Democrats. In preparation for the debate on the Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization, they seem to have been misinformed about a great many things, among them that —

- ▶ Title I has “effectively enhance[d] academic achievement”;
- ▶ the status quo somehow guarantees student achievement;
- ▶ parental control is something to be feared; and
- ▶ that the contents of the Republican Educational Opportunities Act (S. 2) contains no accountability safeguards.



Enhanced Academic Achievement?—Which Title I Are You Looking At, Sir?

In his initial floor statement on S. 2, Senator Kennedy charged that Republicans are “significantly eliminating and reducing the requirements which had been applicable at the local level, that ensure Title I funds were used effectively to enhance academic achievement” [*Congressional Record*, May 1, 2000, S3146]. Someone should inform Senator Kennedy that Title I funds have *not* effectively enhanced disadvantaged students’ education — not in 35 years. After \$120 billion has been spent on the program, large gaps in student achievement between Title I and non-Title I students persist across all subjects.

Status Quo Guarantees Everything *But* Achievement

Senate Democrats would have us believe that a federal mandate guarantees the desired results. Note that Senator Kennedy apparently has dropped from his vocabulary the word “mandate” — one of his favorites — and substituted the word “guarantee.” So taken is the Senator with his subterfuge that he used it 20 times in his opening statement on S. 2:

On our side, we have attempted to say we are going to provide to parents some guarantees in the area of education . . . smaller class size . . . teacher training . . . afterschool programs . . . buildings that are in a state of collapse . . . Those are guarantees. [*Congressional Record*, May 1, 2000, S3147-8]

No, they are *mandates* that would force schools to spend scarce resources to suit Democrats’ political agenda.

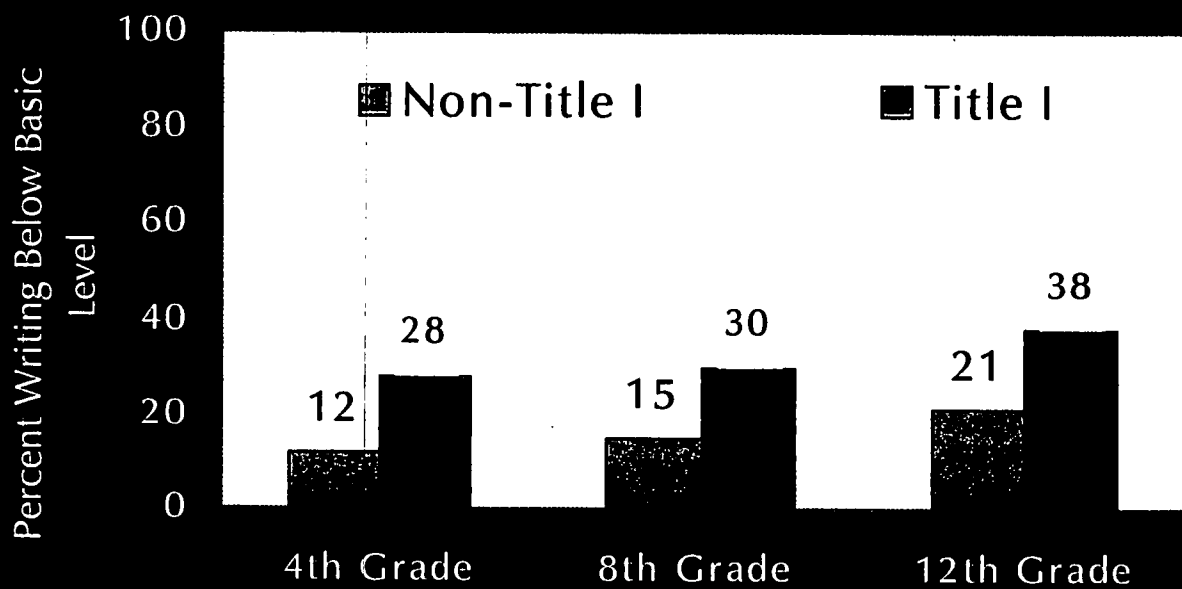
One item on that rigid agenda is teacher mentoring. Regarding the flexible use of teacher training funds under the Teacher Empowerment Act (TEA), Senator Kennedy complains:

Mentoring is only “allowed,” not required, even though virtually all of the major studies show that mentoring programs work. [*Congressional Record*, May 1, 2000, S3149]

Yet the Senator himself makes the case against his own position. Virtually — but not all — studies indicate that mentoring programs work. If they don’t work in some cases, why should Washington force all schools to implement them? Why not leave it up to the schools to decide what they need the most?

While Democrats might force schools to hire more teachers or train them using only Democrat-approved methods, mandates make it less likely that poor kids will learn. That’s because individual schools’ needs are too diverse to be addressed with a one-size-fits-all mandate. The Republican bill recognizes this, and gives states and locals the flexibility to use federal funds for their own most pressing needs when it comes to ensuring quality teachers or closing the gap between poor kids and their peers.

\$120 Billion Later, Poor Kids Still Lag Behind in Writing Skills



Get Your Stories Straight: Do Republicans Involve Parents Or Not?

Again in his opening statement, Senator Kennedy disputed Republican claims that the Educational Opportunities Act expanded parents' involvement in their children's educational decisions:

Where is local control in here? Where is parental involvement in here?
 [Congressional Record, May 1, 2000, S3146]

I hope our friends on the other side of the aisle are going to spare us a lot of discussion about local control and parent involvement because it just isn't there, it just isn't there. [Congressional Record, May 1, 2000, S3148]

Perhaps the best response was given by Senator Patty Murray two days later, as she spoke on the bill's Title I portability provisions:

I am looking at the language of the bill. It says "... that a parent directs that the services be provided through a tutorial assistance provider." It is not directed by the school but directed by the parent. I think that is one of the underlying flaws and concerns we have. ... frankly, the parent is in control. It is very clear in the language of this bill. [Congressional Record, May 3, 2000, S3289-90]

Even more alarming than the Democrats' inability to get their stories straight is the core Democrat belief, articulated by Senator Murray, that goes to the source of their opposition to the Republican position: *Parents are not to be trusted with their children's education.*

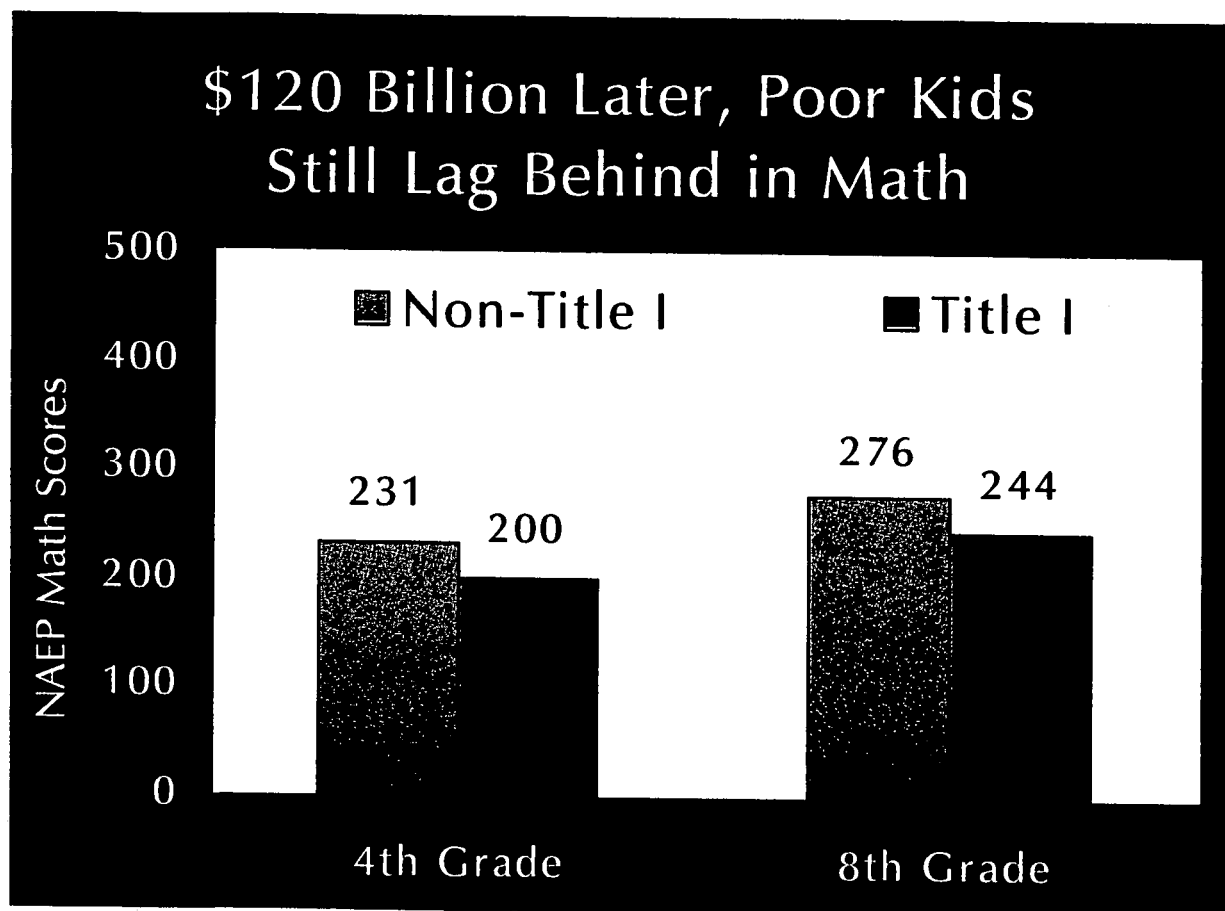
No Accountability Safeguards?—Again, What Bill Are You Reading, Senator?

Title I kids aren't the only ones having trouble with reading. Senate Democrats' misreading of the Republican bill allows them to miss accountability safeguards that are repeated over and over throughout the bill. Senator Kennedy complains that under Straight A's:

A State could demonstrate statewide overall progress based on progress being made by wealthier communities, while a lack of progress in disadvantaged communities remains statistically hidden. Do we understand that? [*Congressional Record*, May 1, 2000, S3147]

Evidently, some of us do and some of us don't. Senator Kennedy should know that the "Straight A's" provision requires annual reports that disaggregate assessment data — that is, to divide up the data into component parts — for the very purpose of ensuring that progress made by minority and disadvantaged children is documented, *not* hidden.

The specific bill language reads:



Within each State, local educational agency, and school by each major racial and ethnic group, gender, English proficiency status, migrant status, and by economically disadvantaged students as compared to students who are not economically disadvantaged (except that such disaggregation shall not be required in cases in which the number of students in any such group is insufficient to yield statistically reliable information or will reveal the identity of an individual student). [S. 2, as reported, pp. 649-50]

Not only that, but S. 2 contains similar safeguards throughout the bill, including the provisions for the Child-Centered program, the Teacher Empowerment Act, school dropouts, advanced placement, Performance Partnerships, and bilingual education.

Tried and Tested? Exactly. That's Why it's Time for a Change

"The Senate has a choice," explained Senator Kennedy. Will it pass the Republican Educational Opportunities Act, "or, on the other hand, are we going to follow the tried and tested programs that have demonstrated results for children at the local level?" [*Congressional Record*, May 1, 2000, S3148].

The Senator is correct: his command-and-control approach is tried and tested, and it has demonstrated results. However, the results it has demonstrated are abysmal.

Senator Kennedy argues, "The reason we have Title I is because we decided in 1965 that the needs of disadvantaged children were not being addressed" [Senator Kennedy, *Congressional Record*, May 1, 2000, S3146]. Thirty-five years later, we find once again that the needs of poor kids are being ignored. This time, it is by those who would defend the status quo at all costs, even if it means trapping another generation of disadvantaged kids in failing schools where parents are shut out, and innovators' hands are tied by dictates from Washington. The Republican Educational Opportunities Act marks the beginning of the end of this failure.

RPC staff contact: Michael F. Cannon, 224-2946
Source of charts: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 1996, 1998